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CHAUCEUR'S USE OF *THE DREAM OF SCIPIO* IN *THE PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS*

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The notion that medieval authors treated their pagan precursors in a totally ahistorical fashion, allegorizing their narratives and "Christianizing" their philosophies, has in recent years come under closer scrutiny, and has been found wanting. A.J. Minnis¹ has demonstrated quite clearly that there was a variety of attitudes to be found in Chaucer's England concerning both the successes and the limitations of classical thought, and that a subtle intellect such as Chaucer's was capable of manipulating all of them for his own poetic purposes.

The opening lines of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*² offer an interesting test case for determining a range of attitudes toward pagan thought, for they are based on one of the more generally respected pieces of classical philosophy, but place it into the rather unusual context of a dream vision whose major topic is a gathering of birds who are choosing their mates. Most previous critics have begun, I think, from the belief that Chaucer is here showing full admiration for his source text, and so have seen in his modifications of it nothing more than the desire to update

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¹ A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 1982).

² All Chaucer quotations are taken from the second edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1957).

and sanitize it a little for his Christian audience. If we are willing to entertain the idea that he was doing something more complex, a rather different view of the scene emerges, suggesting that he was considerably more critical of the legacy of the past than is often thought.

The narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls* gives his reason for reading *The Dream of Scipio* at the end of the third stanza of the poem. He has come upon an old book, and

therupon, a certeyn thing to lerne
The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne. (20-21)

The vagueness of these lines, and especially of the phrase “a certeyn thing,” has prompted critics to be more precise than the poet by specifying the nature of the goal. It is usually taken to be a reference to questions about love: R.M. Lumiansky cites with approval the view of R.C. Goffin, who

takes the first ninety-one lines of the poem as Chaucer’s statement of his effort to find a solution for his dilemma as to whether his writings should be devoted to moral teaching or to the god of love, and of his search in his “olde boke totorn” for a point of view which would reconcile true and false felicity, the “certeyn thing” Chaucer wished to learn in order to justify in the light of religion those of his writings which had dealt with love.³

This approach, which is by no means idiosyncratic, seeks not to interpret the lines, but to rewrite them: for “certeyn thing,” read “way to reconcile true and false felicity.” Further, this strategy does little to explain the dichotomy between Chaucer the author and his naive narrator, for it treats the two as identical.

A slightly different view, though based in a similar method of interpretation, is advanced by Wolfgang Clemen. He reports that, in the view of Brigitte Thuler, one of his students, “‘Certeyn’ is to mean here ‘precise, definite’; in that case, ‘a certeyn thing’ would refer to the true and reliable wisdom contained in Christian philosophy, resting on a sure foundation, and not subject to the mutability and contradiction of love which had

³ R.M. Lumiansky, “Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules*: A Philosophical Interpretation,” *Review of English Studies* xxiv (1948) 83, paraphrasing R.C. Goffin, “Heaven and Earth in the *Parlement of Foules*,” *Modern Language Review* 81 (1936) 493-99.

been the poet's theme in the first two stanzas."⁴ While there is perhaps nothing to be preferred in a view which says "for 'certeyn thing' read 'Christian Philosophy,'" Thuler's ideas do provide the possibility of a deeper interpretation of what the poet actually wrote. We do not need to replace his words, as if either the author or the narrator were being coy, but rather we may see that the meaning of the words is context-dependent, and that the context includes the question of the identity of the speaker.

The narrator is reading the *Somnium Scipionis* to learn something; he does not specify what it is, but there is no reason to assume that he wanted anything more than what the *Somnium* claimed to teach. After all, he spent the whole day reading the book, and does not suggest that its material was anything other than what he expected. But the language which Chaucer writes for him is susceptible of two different interpretations. The reader is permitted to think of "certeyn" as meaning "definite," and to realize that, whatever the narrator's conscious purpose may be, Chaucer wishes us to judge both the book and the narrator's reading of it according to this criterion: Is the knowledge transmitted by the book to the narrator something which can truly be characterized as "certain"?

The narrator's own term for what he is seeking is "science." He explains his reason for looking in the *Somnium* rather than elsewhere in a rather homely metaphor:

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (22-25)

These lines have been interpreted according to the same rewriting strategy as those discussed above. Bennett tells us that "The 'newe science' of scholasticism had made it possible to reinterpret Aristotle without jettisoning either St. Augustine or the neoplatonists."⁵ Lumiansky thinks that for "science" we should read "Lollardy"; Chaucer looks to Macrobius to find authorita-

⁴ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, tr. C.A.M. Sym (London: Methuen 1963) p. 136, n. 2.

⁵ J.A.W. Bennett, *The Parlement of Foules* (Oxford: Clarendon 1957) p. 31.

tive antique ammunition against the efforts of "such men as Lollards who placed new and vigorous emphasis on the instability of worldly pleasures."⁶

In this case also it is not necessary to replace Chaucer's words by others in order to discover fuller meaning in them, nor need we arbitrarily select "scholasticism" or "Lollardy" as the author's main concern. The imagery used may well be of some assistance; Robertson and Huppé point out the similarity to a passage in Alanus, where the grain of faith comes from the field of Scripture.⁷ But there is a similar passage in Chaucer's own work which should not be overlooked. When Pandarus is speaking to Troilus about the mutability of human fortune, he says

For thilke grownd that bereth the wedes wikke
Bereth ek thise halsom herbes, as ful ofte
Next the foule netle, rough and thikke
The roxe waxeth swoot and smothe and softe;
And next the valeye is the hil o-lofte;
And next the derke nyght the glade morwe;
And also joie is next the fyn of sorwe. (*Troilus*, I.946 ff.)

Pandarus is speaking optimistically here, concentrating on the better side of each pair of opposites, but from our viewpoint outside the action we can see that each change may be reversed. If, in the framework of Chaucer's metaphor, both good and evil come from the same field, it is at least a viable possibility that the "newe science" which may be derived from the *Somnium* is as much a nettle as a rose.

"Science" is not an especially common word in Chaucer's works, but there are enough occurrences to establish that for him, as well as for many of his contemporaries, it was not a univocal term.⁸ In *The Tale of Melibeus* and in *The Parson's Tale* it is used as a perfectly respectable word with solid classical and biblical roots:

And Tullius seith that grete thynges ne been nat ay accompliced by strengthe, ne by delivernesse of body, but by good conseil, by auctoritee of persones, and by science. (*Melibeus*, 2355)

⁶ Lumiansky, p. 84.

⁷ D.W. Robertson, Jr. and B. Huppé, *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 1963) p. 104.

⁸ See also C. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1976) pp. 19-20 *et passim*.

For, as that seith Salomon, "Whoso that hadde the science to knowe the peynes that been establissed and ordeyned for synne, he wolde make sorwe." "Thilke science," as seith Seint Augustyn, "maketh a man to waymenten in his herte." (*Parson's Tale*, 229-30)

On the other hand, science is also the rather suspect means by which Calchas has his foreknowledge of the fall of Troy (*Troilus*, l.66) and the skill whereby the Man of Law makes his profits (*General Prologue*, 316). More pointedly, it appears frequently in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* to refer to the canon's dubious arts:

With this Chanoun I dwelt have seven yeer,
And of his science am I never the neer (CYT, 721)
That slidyng science hath me maad so bare
That I have no good, wher that evere I fare (CYT, 732)

The dark side of "science" is at the root of a discussion Langland reports in *Piers Plowman*, when Anima reproaches Will for wanting to know all the sciences:

Couetise to konne and to knowe science
Adam and Eue putte out of Paradis.
Sciencie appetitus hominem immortalitatis gloriam
spoliauit. (B. xv:62-64)⁹

The pernicious effects of the desire for science in the descendants of Adam are also explained in the *Book of Privy Counselling*, but in addition to his diagnosis, the author also suggests a remedy:

seche more after felyng then after kunnyng; for kunnyng oft-time
disceywith with pride, but meek louely felyng may not begile. Sci-
encia inflat, karitas edificat. In knowing is trauaille, in felyng is rest.¹⁰

As with the word "certeyn," we do not need to choose between the two sides of "science," but only to appreciate the full range of responses permitted by the text. The narrator is searching for the kind of science approved by Solomon and Cicero, knowledge about man and his role in the scheme of things. The

⁹ Quotations from Langland are taken from *Piers Plowman: The B-Version*, ed. G. Kane and E. Donaldson (London: The Athlone Press 1975).

¹⁰ *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. P. Hodgson, *EETS* o.s. 218, pp. 171-72.

author, however, has him express himself in words which suggest that he is not necessarily going to find what he is seeking. He speaks of the science "that men lere," that is, the science which is capable of being taught and learned by men. As such, it contrasts with divine science, at least for a more critical reader than the narrator. The essential difference between the two is stated succinctly by Aquinas: "Sacred doctrine surpasses other speculative sciences in both respects. It is more certain, since the certainty of other sciences depends on the natural light of human reason, which is liable to err, whereas its own certainty is founded on the light of divine knowledge, which cannot be deceived" (I, q. 1, art. 5).¹¹ The certainty which the narrator desires, without really knowing it, is not to be found in the science that men teach according to the light of human reason, but in the sacred science founded on the light of divine knowledge.

This same contrast between the kind of knowledge that may be acquired through the efforts of human reason and the kind based on divine inspiration is also to be found in the imagery and allusions of the thirteenth stanza, in which the narrator describes the end of his reading. These lines appear to Clemen to be "treated more naturally and with greater realism than in *The House of Fame* (112 ff.) or in *The Book of the Duchess* (270 ff.)—for here darkness has begun to fall and has prevented the poet from reading on; his day's 'labour' has tired him and so he comes 'to slepe faste.'"¹² If we take these lines as a simple statement of fact, and spoken by the poet rather than the narrator, they do in fact seem to be naturalistic and all but meaningless. But by placing them in their full literary context and by analyzing them in terms of the contrast between the two "sciences," we may show that there is considerably more to the stanza than the simple transition between segments of the poem.

As has often been noted, the first two lines are modeled on a passage from *The Divine Comedy*. Chaucer's

The day gan faylen, and the derke nyght,
That reveth bestes from here besynesse (85-86)

¹¹ Translations taken from *Summa Theologica*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros. 1947-48).

¹² Clemen, p. 137.

owes its inspiration to Dante's

The day was departing and the darkened air releasing the creatures
on the earth from their labours. (*Inf.*, II.1-3)¹³

There is no indication here that the narrator is to be seen as making a literary allusion, or indeed doing anything other than describing his own experience. It is Chaucer who is making the allusion, and in a way which reveals something rather more important than the time of day. Dante's lines are followed by a description of his narrator's alienated state and the struggle to which he has been called:

and I, alone, was preparing to endure the conflict both of the way
and of the pity of it, which memory that does not err shall recount.
(*Inf.*, II.3-6)

He is still the man who found himself in the dark wood, completely cut off from the right road. He is the man who will lose heart before the beginning of the journey, saying

I am not Aeneas; I am not Paul. Neither I nor any man thinks me fit
for this. (*Inf.*, II.32-33)

His own resources are not sufficient to carry him on his way, and he needs constant divine aid, as well as encouragement from Virgil and from Beatrice, to complete his task. The point of Chaucer's allusion is lost unless we recognize that he has assimilated his narrator to Dante's in order to establish that man needs divine gifts to attain the vision of the good. Conversely, he also manages to assure us that his narrator, like Dante's, will not have to struggle completely unaided.

Chaucer's dark night does not merely relieve animals from their tasks, it also puts a stop to the narrator's reading. Once again, the language used to describe this fact is couched in imagery which reveals more than the narrator knows. He says that the night "Berafte me my bok for lak of lyght" (87). To the narrator, this is a simple factual description related to the problems of reading a text without strong natural light, but we can see behind it a clever use of a common image, equating light

¹³ Translations of Dante from *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1961).

with grace. We have already quoted Aquinas on "the natural light of human reason" and "the light of divine knowledge"; in another section he reminds us that: "A man cannot then restore himself, but needs the light of grace shed on him anew, like a soul reentering a dead body to bring it back to life" (I^a. II^{ae}, q. 109, art. 7). From this point of view, we may suggest that the narrator is deprived of his book for lack of light because the book itself lacks the light of divine grace; demonstration of this point will of course depend on a closer analysis of the contents of the book as reported by the narrator.

The narrator's last general comment on his response to the book is an expression of vague dissatisfaction, though he does not blame the book itself directly:

And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,
Fulfyld of thought and busy hevynesse;
For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
And ek I nadde that thyng that I wolde. (88-91)

As with the phrase "a certeyn thing," critical response to these lines has generally centered on an attempt to define what these two "things" are, so that this vague statement may be translated into something more precise. Bennett asserts confidently that "it is love doctrine which Chaucer has sought and not found,"¹⁴ arguing from a partial parallel that the "thyngs" are those which Gower "characteristically makes . . . explicit: 'He which hath of love his make. . . . He hath that he wolde have' (*Con. Ama.*, viii. 3078-83)."¹⁵ I. L. Gordon is certain that "what he had and did not want, from his reading, must surely be the contempt of this world which Africanus' words had advocated."¹⁶ Goffin and Lumiansky think that "he had found an emphasis on true felicity alone, but he had not found a way of reconciling true and false felicity."¹⁷ None of these interpretations gives sufficient credit to the poet, nor does any of them explain why he should choose to express himself in this vague fashion if the true meaning is actually so straightforward.

¹⁴ Bennett, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Ida L. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus* (Oxford: Clarendon 1970) p. 141.

¹⁷ Lumiansky, p. 84.

It is not Chaucer who feels at a loss, but the narrator; he utters a vague expression of discontent because he feels a vague discontent. The *Somnium* has not fulfilled his desire for *certain* knowledge, but this was a desire of which he was only vaguely aware; the insufficiencies of the book are beyond his ken. The author, however, is in a position to present us with the material necessary for understanding both the book and its reader. He borrows the words with which the narrator describes his uneasiness from a section of *The Consolation of Philosophy* in which Philosophy questions "Boethius" about his state of mind during his former prosperity, and leads him to confess that he was always in a state of anxiety:

"First and forward thow thiself, that haddest haboundances of rychesses, nat longe agoon, I aske yif that, in the haboundance of alle thilke rychesses thow were nevere angwyssous ne sory in thy corage of any wrong or grevance that bytydde the on any side?"

"Certes," quod I, "it ne remembreth me nat that evere I was so fre of my thought that I ne was alwey in angwyse of somewhat."

Philosophy then proceeds to explain this condition:

"And was nat that" quod sche, "for that the lakkide somewhat that thow woldest nat han lakkid, or else that thou haddest that thow noldest nat han had?" (*Boece*, III, pr. 3)

This parallel has often been noted, but critical response has been insufficient. Winny refuses to consider it at all, arguing that "the derivation of the remark from *Boece* is not helpful, for Boethius is writing of the anxieties which beset those who enjoy 'haboundances of rychesses,' a subject of no relevance to the *Parliament*."¹⁸ But it would be an error to think that riches are the only worldly possession which a man may think will lead to bliss but which instead lead to anxiety. Boethius is simply using them as one example of apparently good things which do not keep their promise to a man in search of true happiness. This is made clear by the fuller context from which these lines are derived:

Certes also ye men, that ben erthliche beestes, dremen alwey your bygynnyng, although it be with a thynne ymaginacioun; and by a maner thought, al be it nat clerly ne parfitly, ye loken from afer to

¹⁸ James Winney, *Chaucer's Dream Poems* (Barnes and Noble: New York 1973) pp. 116-17.

thilke verray fyn of blisfulnesse. And therefore naturel entencioun ledeth yow to thilke verray good, but many maner errours mystorneth yow therfro. Considere now yif that by thilke thynges by which a man weneth to geten hym blisfulnesse, yif that he mai comen to thilke ende that he weneth to come by nature. For yif that moneye, or honours, or thise other forseide thynges, brynge to men swich a thyng that no good ne fayle hem ne semeth faile, certes thanne wol I graunte that they ben maked blisful by thilke thynges that thei han geten. But yif it so be that thilke thynges mowen nat performen that they byheten, and that there be defaute of manye goodis, schewith it nat thanne clerly that false beute of blysfulnesse is knowen and ataynt in thilke thynges. (*Boece*, III, pr. 3)

The *Somnium* is one of “thilke thynges that mowen nat performen that they byheten.” The narrator has shown a “naturel entencioun” which leads him toward “verray good”; but with his “thynne ymaginacioun” he has been disappointed by his reliance on the *Somnium* which, as a book founded on human reason, cannot keep its promise to explain the workings of earth, heaven, and hell.

It should not be thought that Boethius describes and diagnoses this kind of anxiety without offering a solution. In the previous book, *Philosophy* has explained that

yif it so be that thow art myghty over thyself (that is to seyn, by tranquillite of thi soule) then hastow thyng in thi power that thou noldest nevere leesen, ne Fortune may not bynemen it the. (*Boece*, II, pr. 4, ll. 134 ff.)

This kind of solution, quite at odds with that proposed by Macrobius, rests on the same kind of awareness of the need for divine grace as lies behind the ambiguous language of the earlier stanzas. Now that we have recognized that the difficulty with the *Somnium* is that it does not deliver on its own promises, we may proceed to a step-by-step analysis of its contents and its essential deficiencies.

* * *

Despite the diversity of opinion about the function of the narrator’s description of the *Somnium*, critics seem to agree that it is somehow “Christian.” Clemen is most emphatic in asserting that “the *Somnium* (as Macrobius presented it) came to be regarded as an outstanding example of classical doctrine embodying Christian teaching. Chaucer’s version, too, which omitted

numerous details and personal touches and gave only Africanus' essential admonitions and teaching, is wholly Christian in outlook."¹⁹ Brewer, in his edition of *The Parlement of Foulys*, suggests that Chaucer has deliberately "Christianized" his text to make it more palatable.²⁰ Burlin seems to be alone in suggesting that "The dissatisfaction expressed by the dreamer may also reflect the limited relevance of their pagan formulations to his Christian mode of Experience,"²¹ but he neither defines "pagan" and "Christian" more precisely than the other critics nor analyzes the contents of the *Somnium* in the light of this perception. Both of these tasks, definition of terms and an analytic inventory of the description of the *Somnium*, must be undertaken before we may understand its function in the poem.

We have already seen that the *Somnium* is being faulted for claiming to present divine knowledge even though it is grounded in purely human reason. As a corollary, salvation is presented here in a form which lays more stress on the efficacy of human effort than on the need for divine grace. This dichotomy, more precise than the pagan/Christian contrast of other critical approaches, can be used to determine the two levels of narration in the poem and can ultimately suggest the relevance of a discourse on salvation to a poem about the attempts to win earthly love and to acquire poetic ability.

The narrator presents his overview of the *Somnium* in the poem's fifth stanza, dividing it into three sections which may serve as the basis for our discussion of its doctrine:

This bok of which I make mencoun
Entitled was al thus as I shal telle:
"Tullyus of the drem of Scipioun."
Chapitres sevene it hadde, of hevene and helle,
And erthe, and soules that therinne dwelle,
Of whiche, as shortly as I can it trete,
Of his sentence I wol yow seyn the greete. (29-35)

The narrator believes, then, that he has read a book which describes heaven, hell and the souls of men on earth. An analysis

¹⁹ Clemen, pp. 132-33.

²⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parlement of Foulys*, ed. D.S. Brewer (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1972) note to 11.73-77.

²¹ Robert Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977) p. 87.

of the doctrine it presents, however, shows that it falls short in all three areas, by contemporary orthodox standards, in that it underestimates the role of divine grace.

One of the ways in which Chaucer remoulds Cicero's text is in his treatment of the passage in which Africanus speaks of the vanity of hoping for immortal glory: in his author, Chaucer read the following: "But even if the children of the future should wish to hand down in succession to their posterity the praises of each of us which they have received from their fathers, nevertheless because of floods and fires which necessarily happen at particular times on earth, we cannot achieve even long-lasting glory, let alone eternal." (*Somnium* 7.1)²² Africanus goes on to explain that even those who hear of our earthly glory will not remember it for a year, that is, for a Platonic great year, which is measured not in accordance with the return of the sun to its place but by the return of all the stars to the configuration from which they set out. In the *Parliament*, the focus of this statement is inverted and it is presented in a more extreme form. It is not simply that time and the mutability of the world will lead to an inevitable loss of the memory of earthly glory, but rather that the human "slate will be wiped clean" with the passage of a fixed millennium:

Thanne tolde he hym, in certeyn yeres space
That every sterre shulde come in to his place
Ther it was first, and al schuld out of mynde
That in this world is don of al mankynde. (67-70)

At the end of time, according to this concept, there will be no memory at all of any human affairs.

Such a statement would appear to fourteenth-century thinkers as, at best, wishful thinking. A contemporary of Chaucer's argues in a sermon that a man's deeds will be remembered in all their details at least until the day of judgment:

As to þe fyrste, I sey þat God shall kepe vp euery maner of wickednes þat anny man or wymman dothe levyng in þis worlde, and not all-lonly þe wicked werkes, but all wicked and ydell wordes and vnclene þouȝthes, not oon lefte behynde. Redyly þis wittenesse holywritte: "De omni verbo

²² Translations from the *Somnium* are taken from the appendix to Brewer's edition.

ocioso, quodcunque locuti fuerint homines, reddent rationem in die iudicii
—of euery maner ydell worde, what-euer it be, þat men or wymmen speken,
þei shall zeue a-countes þer-of at þe Day of Dome.”

He proceeds to crush even the hope that the sins of which we have been absolved may be kept hidden from others:

Seynt Austyne in ys Elucidarie certeynly seyþ þat all angels, all seyntes, all þe devels, all þe world shall know all þe debes þat euere þou dydeste, þoz þou have be shryven of hem and contryte. But, sir, þis knalage shall be no shame to þe ziff þat þou be saued, but rapur a wurshippe, ryght as we rede of þe dedes of Mary Magdaleyne to hure wurshippe and not to hure repreffe.

The unknown preacher’s summary stands in the starkest contrast to the promise from Africanus:

God þenkes vppon all oure wyckednes and kepes hem in-to þe Day of Iugement; and at þat tyme all þe worlde shall knowe itt to þe good to wurshippe, and to þe evyll grett shame and repreffe.²³

Another near-contemporary, the author of *The Pricke of Conscience*, formerly attributed to Richard Rolle, also says that there will be remembrance even of sins for which a soul has been cleansed, and adds an explanation for which he claims the authority of St. Anselm.

Bot now may þou ask me and lere
A questyon, and say on þis manere:
‘Salle þai oght think þat salle be safe
On þe syns of whilk þai þam scrafe
Here in þair lyfe, and made þam clene,
And of þam assoyled has bene?’
Saint Anselm ansers to þis,
And says þat þou þat salle have heven blys,
Salle love God and thank him þare
Of alle gudes, both las and mare,
Þat he has done tylle þe here,
And tylle alle othere, on þe same manere,
Þe whilk, at þe day of dome, salle be safe,
And with the endles blys salle have.
Gret gud he dose þe, whils þou lyfes,
When he þi syns þe here forgyves;
How moht þou þan, with hert fre,
Thank God of þat þat he has forgyven þe,

²³ *Middle English Sermons*, ed. W. O. Ross, *EETS* o.s. 209, p. 28.

Alle þe syns þat þou has wrought,
If þou moght thynk on nane in thoght?²⁴

The author then proceeds to tell us, in similar fashion, that this memory of sin will not cause the souls of the blessed any discomfort, but rather it will be like a wound which is perfectly healed.

On these authorities, then, we may argue that for a fourteenth-century audience all that is done by all mankind will not ever pass out of mind. The reason for this is that remembrance of past sins is a necessary condition for the proper appreciation of God's grace in forgiving our sins.

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The *Somnium*, as described in *The Parliament of Fowls*, offers a certain road to salvation. Africanus' first statement to Scipio promises that

what man, lered other lewed,
That loved commune profyt, wel ithewed,
He shulde into a blysfyl place wende,
There as joye is that last withouten ende. (46-49)

Later on, Scipio asks him again to explain to him how to reach heaven, and is given a similar answer:

And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse
To comune profit, and thow shalt not mysse
To comen swiftly to that place deere,
That ful of blysse is and of soulys cleere. (74-77)

"Common profit" looms large in both the criticism of the *Parliament* and in the writings of Chaucer's contemporaries. For Robertson and Huppé, "Love of common profit is the love of one's neighbour, charity, and the opposite of self-love, the source of sin."²⁵ They paraphrase lines 74-75 of the poem as "Man must seek after Truth." Ian Robinson speaks of the medieval admiration for the *Somnium* as "a descendant of the stoic tradition, which attached importance to public and private decency, sobriety and particularly 'commune profit,' that is, the interest

²⁴ [Richard Rolle], *The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. Richard Morris (Berlin 1863) 11.8297-8316.

²⁵ Robertson and Huppé, p. 106.

of the community.”²⁶ This doctrine is presented in the *Parliament*, according to Robinson, to balance and to define love: “Any judgment is of both terms: perhaps ‘commune profit’ makes clear the frivolity of love—but only to the extent that love makes clear the solemnity and self-seeking of ‘commune profit.’”²⁷ John Fyler includes common profit among the doctrines which are “striking analogies” to the Christian picture of universal order: “the promise of an afterlife, with reward or punishment; the comparable position of a ‘commune profit’ and of charity as man’s way to find truth by love.”²⁸

Despite the fact that the words “common profit” were used to denote an extremely important idea in Chaucer’s time, we must be wary of thinking that any praise of it is therefore automatically valid. Africanus promises speedy salvation for anyone who loves and works for common profit; the effort expended on its behalf is therefore to be seen as the purchase price for salvation. Medieval thinkers were quite sensitive to the fact that bribery need not take the form of an offer of money; Yunck quotes an anonymous commentary on the Psalms describing three types of meed: meed from the hand, meed from service, and meed from the tongue. “Meed from service is when any fleshly service is demanded or offered for a spiritual honour.”²⁹ Working for common profit is an admirable activity, but as a descendant of the Roman ideal of the *res publica* it is certainly to be counted as a worldly activity and hence not to be offered in return for a spiritual honor.

Indeed, from an orthodox point of view, there is no work at all which can be used to win salvation, no way that a man may acquire it out of his own resources:

For some men venen when þat þei do a good dede, þei suppose þat it cometh of here own ryghtwisnes; and it is not so, but it is oonly of Cristes

²⁶ Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1972) p. 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁸ John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press 1979) p. 87.

²⁹ John A. Yunck, *The Lineage of Lady Meed: The Development of Medieval Venality Satire* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1963) p. 36, quoting (pseudo-) Beda Venerabilis, *In Psalmorum librum exegesis xxv*, in *PL* 93.611-12.

mercie and of is goodnes, as Seynt Poule berethe witteness in a pistell þat he makede ad Titum, þe þride chapitur: "Non ex operibus iusticie que fecimus nos, sed secundum misericordiam suam saluos nos fecit—not of þe verkes of ryghtwysnes þat we haue do, but aftur is mercye he haþ made vs saue."³⁰

Aquinas, reminding us that "If righteousness come by the law, then is Christ dead in vain" (Gal 2:21), gives a reasoned explanation for the situation:

... actions which lead to an end must be commensurate with the end. But no action transcends the limits of the principle by which a thing acts. Thus we see that no natural thing can produce, by its own action an effect which exceeds what is commensurate with human nature, as is clear from what we said in Q. 5 Art. 5. It follows that a man cannot, by his natural powers, produce meritorious works commensurate with eternal life. A higher power is needed for this, namely the power of grace. Hence a man cannot merit eternal life without grace, although he can perform works which lead to such good as is connatural to him, such as labour in the field, eat, drink, have friends and so on, as is said by Augustine (or by another in *Contra Pelagianos* 3; *Hypognosticon* 3, cap. 4). (I^a. II^{ae}, q. 109, art. 5)

No human activity, no matter how noble, not even the working for common profit, is sufficient to win salvation. To claim otherwise is, as implied by the source of Aquinas' quotation, Pelagian, in that it denies the necessity for divine grace.

Bennett spends several pages analyzing the twelfth stanze of the *Parliament*, and comes to the conclusion that Macrobius' phrase "impetrata purgatione" (purgation having been acquired), was all that was necessary to "enable Chaucer to give the passage a meaning consistent with Christian orthodoxy."³¹ Clemen calls this stanza a "Christian version of the punishment meted out to the 'likerous folk' whom Cicero mentions in section nine of the *Somnium*."³² Such a passage is clearly of great importance to the view that the *Somnium* has been "Christianized," and must be examined closely if our conclusions about this section of the *Parliament* are to stand.

The Ciceronian original of the passage reads as follows: "For the souls of those who have given themselves up to the pleasure of the body, and who at the instigation of desires subservient to

³⁰ *Middle English Sermons*, pp. 84-85.

³¹ Bennett, pp. 41-44.

³² Clemen, p. 134.

pleasure have broken the laws of gods and men, when they have left their bodies fly around the earth itself, and do not return to this place except after many ages of torment" (*Somnium* 9.3). Where Cicero leaves us with an impression of the pain of those who break the law, Chaucer's version shows a greater emphasis on their eventual passage to heaven:

But brekers of the lawe, soth to seyne,
And likerous folk, after that they ben dede,
Shul whirle about th'erthe alwey in peyne,
Tyl many a world be passed, out of drede,
And than, foryeven al hire wikked dede
That shul they come into this blyful place,
To which to comen, God the sende his grace. (78-84)

The difference between the two attitudes may be attributed at least in part to the comment of Macrobius, who says, "For it is necessary that every soul return to the place of its origin."³³

Brewer's note to this stanza explains what it is about it which allows it to be considered Christian: "This passage in some ways resembles the doctrine of Purgatory."³⁴ The resemblances are present, to be sure, but the differences have been overlooked, or rather suppressed, in order to claim orthodoxy for Macrobius. Bennett argues that the phrase "impetrata purgatione" "may have reminded [Chaucer] that ... in *Purgatorio* xxvi we are shown the lecherous who have repented of their lust and who will attain at length to heavenly bliss."³⁵ One such person introduces himself as follows: "I am Guido Guinicelli, and I make my purgation already because of my good sorrowing before the end" (*Purg.* xxvi.92-93). Robertson and Huppé interpret the section similarly: "Since Chaucer's poem is light in tone, he speaks only of the lecherous who have repented in time so that after 'many a world be passed' in Purgatory, 'than shul they come into this blyful place.'"³⁶

Unfortunately, this is not an accurate description of what Chaucer wrote. The narrator believes that the *Somnium* describes "heuene and helle," not heaven and purgatory. There is

³³ Bennett, p. 43, n. 2.

³⁴ Brewer, note to 11. 78-84.

³⁵ Bennett, pp. 44-45.

³⁶ Robertson and Huppé, pp. 107-08.

no mention anywhere in Cicero, or in Macrobius, or in the *Parliament* of repentance on the part of the "lykerous folk," and so no justification for believing that the promise of eternal salvation is being limited to those who have been through a proper confession. The references to forgiveness (82) and grace (84) are not, *pace* Clemen, proof of orthodoxy, given that salvation eventually comes to every soul. The *Somnium* section of the *Parliament* does not simply overlook hell, it denies its existence. While we may agree with Bennett that Chaucer "can hardly be accused of any universalist heresy,"³⁷ the same cannot be said of the *Somnium* or the summary of it in the *Parliament*.

When a question is raised regarding the existence of hell and the justification for its pains, the orthodox explanation is likely to be grounded in Rom 9:19 ff.:

Thou wilt say therefore to me: Why doth he then find fault? for who resisteth his will? O man, who art thou that repliest against God? . . . What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction, that he might shew the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he hath prepared unto glory? . . . What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who followed not after justice, have attained to justice, even the justice that is of faith. But Israel, by following after the law of justice, is not come unto the law of justice. Why so? Because *they sought it not by faith, but as it were of works.*³⁸

The purpose of eternal punishment is explained in a fourteenth-century sermon in accordance with this view:

For-sothe þat chastisement is full harde, þer-as shall be euerelastyng peyne withoute anny reste opur ese. Syre, þou may asshe why God wol suffre men to leffen ill þat ben Cristen, and so to deserue peyne. Syre, I may sey þe, for to shewe is lordeshippe and þat he ys lorde of all þe werlde. Þan in þat, þat he is lorde—quia Dominus vniuersorum tu es—þan it longeþ to hym to be ryghtwisse; þat is to sey to zelde goode men good pinges, and to ewyll men evyll. Þis longeþ to ryghtwysnes. He moste also suffre men to done yll to shew ys mercy, þe wiche is chefe of ys verkes, as Daudid seyþ; for ziffe men trespassed not, þei neded not to haske mercy. So þen for ryght and for mercy and for oure beste he suffres vs to don eyvll; for and we amende, þan oure ioye shall be encreased.³⁹

³⁷ Bennett, p. 44.

³⁸ Translations from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

³⁹ *Middle English Sermons*, p. 29.

In contemporary orthodox terms, then, by denying hell and its endless punishments, the *Somnium*, as it is presented in the *Parliament*, is also denying one of the important conditions for the manifestation of God's grace to those he has prepared for salvation.

* * *

The line in the *Somnium* section of the *Parliament* which has been most universally regarded as a Christianization of the original is line 73, "Know thyself first immortal." This corresponds to Cicero's "Deum te igitur scito esse," "Know therefore that you are a god" (*Somnium* 8.2). Bennett calls this a "bold injunction," and quotes with approval Boyance's statement that "La hardiesse du 'tu es un dieu' peut sembler aller plus loin que Platon."⁴⁰ This sentiment is shocking enough to a modern audience that it is unquestioningly regarded as totally pagan, in line with the treatment given deceased Roman emperors and a variety of mythological heroes. Fyler states confidently that the alteration is a deletion of a specifically pagan idea.⁴¹ The contrast between Cicero and Chaucer is indeed striking, especially if we look at Macrobius' commentary, for he insists that this idea sums up the whole of the *Somnium*, that the soul is not merely immortal, but is a god: "Haec sit praesentis operis consummatio, ut animam non solum immortalem sed deum esse clarescat."⁴² Chaucer's charge is not a simple tinkering with the text, since it contradicts what Macrobius thinks to be its essential point.

But the existence of an idea in pagan tradition is no proof that it may not also be a part of a Christian work or a work accepted by Christian tradition. Chaucer does not seem to have felt any need to "Christianize" Boethius, when Lady Philosophy explains that

so as God hymself is blisfulness, thanne is it cler and certein that alle gode folk ben imaked blisful for thei ben gode, and thilke folk that ben blisful it accordeth and is covenable to ben goddes. Thanne is the mede of goode folke swych that no day ne schal empeiren it, ne no wikkidness schal derkne it, ne power of no wyght ne schal nat

⁴⁰ Bennett, p. 40.

⁴¹ Fyler, p. 87.

⁴² Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. I. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner 1963) II.xii.5.

amenusen it, that is to sey, to ben maked goddes. (*Boece*, IV, pr. III, ll. 4-5 ff.)

Similar ideas can be found in an equally reputable and perhaps even more orthodox sources, a speech by Holy Church in *Piers Plowman*:

... who is trewe of his tonge, telleþ noon ooper,
Doop þe werkes þerwiþ and wilneþ no man ille,
He is a god by the gospel, a grounde and o lofte,
And ek ylik to oure lord by Seint Lukes wordes. (B. I.87-90)

It would seem that the question concerning the sentence "You are a god" is not whether it is orthodox, but under what circumstances it is true.

A major scriptural source for the idea is Psalm 81 (82), verse 6: "I say, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.'" In *The Pricke of Conscience* (ll. 8277-96) these lines are applied to the souls of the blessed inasmuch as they are overflowing with eternal wisdom and power. Augustine comments on this passage in the *Ennarrationes in Psalmos*: "He said this, 'I say, Ye are gods,' to those particularly who are predestined to eternal life."⁴³ Similarly, Christ's injunction, "Estote ergo vos perfecti sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est" (Mt 5:68), is glossed by the Fourth Lateran Council: "Be ye perfect by perfection of grace as your heavenly father is perfect by perfection of nature, each in his own manner."⁴⁴ This is the interpretation placed on the line, closer to Chaucer's own time, by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "To þis perfeccion, & alle oþer, oure Lorde Ihesu Criste clepiþ us him-self in þe Gospel, where he biddeþ þat we schuld be parfite by grace as he hymself is by kynde."⁴⁵

There is nothing surprising, then, in the fact that the statement in Psalm 81 that God has called men gods is interpreted in the fourteenth century according to the view of Augustine. For the author of *The Pricke of Conscience*, it refers to the souls of the elect; in *The Cloude of Unknowing*, it is cited in the context

⁴³ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, tr. P. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1956) pp. 396-97.

⁴⁴ Quoted by David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper 1961) p. 7.

⁴⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 44.

of an argument about the essential difference between man and God:

Abouen þi-self þou arte: for whi þou atteynest to come þedir by grace, wheþer þou mayst not come by kynde; þat is to sey, to be onyd to God in spirit & in love & in acordaunce of wille. Byneþe þi God þou arte: for whi þof al it may be seide in maner þat in þis tyme þat þou or anoþer for soche onheed þat feleb þe perfeccion of þis werk may sobfastly, bi witnes of Scripture, be clepid a God—neuerþeles ȝit þou arte bineþe hym. For whi he is God by kynde wiþ-outen biginnyng; & þou þat sumtyme were nouȝt in substance & þerto after when þou were by his miȝt & his love maad ouȝt, wilfuly wiþ synne madest þi-self wors þen nouȝt; only bi his mercy wiþ-outen þi desert arte maad a God in grace, onyd wiþ him in spirit wiþ-outen departyng, boþe here & in blis of heuen wiþ-outen any eende. So þat, þouȝ þou be al one wiþ hym in grace, ȝit þou arte ful fer bineþe hym in kynde.⁴⁶

It is therefore apparent that the flaw in Macrobius' and Cicero's statement "You are a god" is not that in itself it is a pagan idea. What is wrong is that they assert it to be true of man by nature when it is only true by grace. Chaucer's modification of the line to "You are immortal" is not to be explained as "Christianization." It is rather the last and most pointed of a series of reminders that the Platonist doctrines of the *Somnium*, grounded as they are in human reason, can truly promise a man nothing more than mere immortality. Deification, oneness with God, can only be promised by God himself.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.